

2 Corinthians 5:6-10, 14-17    3 Pentecost    6.10.21    Bill Uetricht

Jesus was a storyteller. Parables were what his stories were called. Parables are not fables with a nice little moral point. They tend to be world-challenging or world-reshaping stories that once you hear them you have a sense that something unsettling is going on, even if you are not always sure what. Emily Dickenson suggests to “tell all the truth, but tell it slant.” Jesus, maybe because telling the truth straight might have been a threat to his life, used parables to tell the truth slant. His truth telling kept you off your feet, unbalanced. Dominic Crossan says that Jesus’ parables turn upside down our expectations.

That’s really true in his parables of the growing seed and the mustard seed in today’s gospel reading. He tells us that the kingdom of God, that is, not the place we go when we die, but God’s way of doing things now, is like a person, a farmer who throws seed on the ground, only to sleep at night and have the seed take root and produce fruit. Jesus says that the farmer doesn’t know how all of this works. It just does.

And here we thought life is our responsibility. We make it happen. If it’s going to get done, we got to do it. Life is a matter of our choices, our work. Well, there may be some truth to that, but when it comes to the deepest things, life happens apart from all our work. The growth of the kingdom, the reign of God, the God movement is a great mystery. And while it is a mystery, it happens, nonetheless. That is what I think Mark is assuring his audience, an audience that is dealing with the big and bossy Romans, who are persecuting them. Those Romans are doing their best to intimidate Mark’s early Christian community. And Jesus in Mark today is assuring that community that the movement will still grow because this movement is God’s work.

This is truth being spoken slant to those who threaten Jesus and his movement. The expectations of the disciples are being turned

upside down. I mean, who would think that life is more about trust than control? Not most of us.

The parable of the mustard seed also challenges our expectations, speaks the truth slant to us. Jesus again wants to know what we can compare the kingdom of God, life as if God runs the show. He says it's like a mustard seed, a seed he calls the smallest, or probably more appropriately, the least of all the seeds. It's not impressive, but it creates something really big, so big that birds can put their nests in the bush that the mustard seed produces.

Now I must point out that the mustard bush wasn't thought to be all that glorious. In fact, it was considered a noxious weed. Jesus could have focused on an image that highlighted massive trees, like Ezekiel did as he mentioned noble cedars, but he didn't. Jesus' image is much more modest, ordinary, even somewhat laughable. The work of God, you see, is much more subtle, much more embracing of ordinary people than is the work of the big and bossy Romans. They are good at establishing massive cedars, leaders and systems that grasp your attention because they are so strong and powerful and so mighty and so...violent.

The Jesus movement had its origins in people not from the big city but from villages. Jesus' earliest disciples were generally fishermen and farmers. They weren't movers and shakers. They were probably not the formally educated, creating, I am sure, quite a motley crew. But this is the way the kingdom of God works. It's not about pizzazz, perfection, or even about performance. God takes the gifts that we offer and uses them to create something remarkable, even if sometimes that something remarkable looks like the greatest of all *bushes*, a mustard plant, a seven-foot weed.

This message clearly shatters our expectations. We live in light of the expectations of Rome. We live in light of the expectations of

Madison Avenue, Wall Street, and Hollywood. We live in light of expectations that communicate that appearance is everything, that performance is paramount. And even churches participate in this. It's all about looking good, being smooth, having the prettiest programs and people. But Jesus claims that God's work among us is much deeper than that, much more real.

To grasp this is to get at what Paul in much of his writings and particularly in Second Corinthians is trying to communicate. Here is a guy who is facing great opposition. Let's face it. He had a bad reputation. He once was in charge of the persecution of Christians. And what's more, he probably wasn't much to look at. And maybe he really wasn't that polished as a speaker. But today he says, "We are always confident," even though life in the body doesn't look so good, even though life in the body probably includes some deformities. We are confident, he claims, because we walk by faith, not by sight.

Now he is honest enough to say that sometimes he would just rather die and be in the full presence of Jesus, where it won't be simply about trust. He'll experience God fully. But now, while he is in the body, he wants to please the Lord, and that is what he is up to. And it is the Lord who will be the judge, he says. His opponents don't get to be the judges, even though that is what they want to be.

We aren't accountable to the fashion police, the advertising executives, Wall Street, the neighbors whose trucks or bank accounts are bigger than ours, whose abs are more defined than ours, whose wrinkles are less pronounced than ours, whose mental and emotional health are, of course, healthier than ours, whose speech is more refined than ours.

No, Paul says. The focus of our life is a man who died, a man who died for everyone. In Jesus crucified, we discover that we all are in the same boat. The center of the Christian message is really a man who

failed. Stare at the cross long enough to discover that where God is most at work is found in what the world would label *failure*. Hidden in ordinariness, great struggle, some things that aren't so pretty, people whom the world dismiss as too vulnerable and unsuccessful is the mysterious life-giving love of God that will create a marvelous harvest, even if sometimes the harvest is something the world won't recognize.

And since the center of our life together is a dying, failed man on a cross, Paul says, we look at everything different, especially people. For you see, in the mysterious reign-of-God work, there is a whole new way of doing things, a new creation, Paul calls it. In this new creation, we are given new eyes, new vision to see people through the lens that a suffering man on a cross is. No longer do we look at people through a human point of view. No longer is it about whether they are pretty, wealthy, successful, appropriately moral, high performing, not awkward, like everybody else. It is about who they are in Christ.

The cross is our big parable. The one who told parables becomes the parable as he hangs on a cross. Many try to tame this parable, and understandably so. It's a hard story to grasp. They say things like the cross must have been God's plan, Jesus is gloriously paying the price for our sins. But at its depths, the cross reveals the mysterious work of a God who doesn't operate like human beings. In one rejected by people, God is at work creating a whole new world. The truth is coming at us slant. All of our expectations are being shattered.

And at first, I feel deeply challenged. My world feels turned upside down. But I've got to get it: this is God's world. And may I say, God's world is much more real and much more interesting. It's a world big enough for all of us and ultimately is not all about me and my performance, although it includes me and utilizes my gifts for the sake of bringing about a whole new creation.